

Part 1 - Presentation

Chapter - I

Biography and the works of the poets

1:1 Paul Verlaine -an introduction

Born in Metz, on 30th March 1844, Verlaine was the only child of his parents-Nicolas-Auguste, an infantry captain, and Elisa-Stephanie Dehée. The much longed-for child was naturally doted upon by his mother and an orphan cousin raised by the Verlaine family- Elisa Moncombe. Together, they showered him with their love and forgave all his caprices. When he was seven years old, Verlaine's father resigned from the army, and moved his family to Paris. Young Verlaine got enrolled at the Lycée Bonaparte. This was a turning point in his life, as it was a sudden departure from the warmth of the foyer, to the adventurous, audacious world of his peers. Very often at the beginning, he used to flee to his home in tears, to be greeted with cries of joy and embraces. But the following morning, he was taken back with gentle force. By and by however, Verlaine's weak character, influenced by his comrades, submitted to foreign influences, and a mingling of vanity, insolence, scoffing wit and boastful bravado tempted the soft, dreamy boy, if only for short periods. He committed himself to his Parisian education, both literary and erotic. A tempestuous child, Verlaine was prone to extreme fits of fury, foreshadowing his personality as an adult. In his early teens Verlaine

already possessed his own inner poetic voice. Emotionally unstable, he wrote about escaping from the world in his early poems:

“Aigle au reveur hardi. “Eagle, open your wings
Pour l’ enlever du sol, To the fearless dreamer,
Ouvre ton aile! And take him away!

At the age of fourteen, he sent Victor Hugo, his earliest known poem - **Le Mort (The Dead One)**. At sixteen, he chanced upon a copy of Baudelaire's **Les Fleurs du Mal, (Flowers of Evil)**, which needless to say, completely altered his perceptions about life as well as art.

By the time he received his baccalaureate degree in 1862, Verlaine was an avid reader of the contemporary poets he would soon befriend in literary cafés and salons. For a short span, he did a stint at legal studies abandoning which, he became more and more involved in literary pursuits. He had by this time become strongly addicted to alcohol and absinthe, and also patronized prostitutes – earning the ire of his father, who refused to finance his ‘wayward habits’. Using his influence, his father got him a job as an insurance clerk at first, and later had him inducted in civil service. Rather than doing his job diligently Verlaine was more interested in frequenting the cafes of the ‘Latin Quarter’¹ His father’s death in 1865, left him to his own whims and fancies, overlooked by an indulgent

¹ Abode of bohemian writers and artists

mother, for whom the deeds of ‘pauvre Lelian²’ were but passing youthful fantasies.

Verlaine published his first work **Poèmes Saturniens** (Saturnien Poems) in 1866, with the help of his beloved cousin, Elisa Moncomble. The volume was true to the Parnassian ideals of detached severity, impeccable form, and stoic objectivity. The death of Elisa before long, plunged him into the depths of despair, manifested in his growing intake of alcohol and absinthe. This often led him to violent excesses, of which mostly his mother used to be the victim.

In 1869, he published his second collection- **Fêtes Galantes** (Gallant Celebrations) set in a medieval setting. In this collection he used visual and spatial imagery to create poetry that has been described as “impressionistic music.” The same year he fell in love with Mathilde, the sixteen –year old half-sister of his musician friend, Charles De Sivry. Everyone hoped that this alliance with Mathilde Mauté would halt his descent into depravity. Verlaine regarded Mathilde as a “creature of light,” who would help him overcome his vices. After the year-long customary period of engagement, he married her in 1870. The poems in the collection **La Bonne Chanson** (The Good Song-1871) refer to this happy period in his life. Before long, however, he resumed his drinking habits with renewed vigour, initiating scenes of domestic violence. The advent of Arthur Rimbaud –“the adolescent Satan” into the household, on an invitation by Verlaine, spelt the total ruin of their marriage. After he

² An anagram of Verlaine

abandoned Mathilde and took up with Rimbaud, Verlaine published **Romances Sans Paroles**(RSP - Songs without Words-1874), a collection of verse strongly influenced by this affair. Their relationship was stormy and frequently punctuated by quarrels, until Verlaine shot and wounded Rimbaud during a jealous argument in 1873. Consequently, Verlaine was arrested and sentenced to two year's imprisonment at Mons –a Belgian prison.

While in prison, the poet underwent a conversion to the Catholic faith of his childhood. The work **Sagesse** (Wisdom -1881) is an outcome of this religious experience. After his release from Mons he tried to get reconciled to Mathilde – but by then she had obtained a legal separation. He then travelled to England, and later returned to France to become a teacher of French and Latin. For years he tried to live a new life. However, caught between the aspirations of religious faith and the temptations of the flesh, he yielded to the latter. On his return to Paris in 1882, after almost ten years of sojourns outside the capital- Verlaine sought at first, with only moderate success, to reinstate himself into the literary world that had begun to forget him. The death from typhoid of a student protégé, Lucien Létinois, whom he had taken under his wings and for whom he had more than a paternal regard, was devastating to his fragile psyche. It was followed by an unbridled lapse into the excesses of alcohol and indiscriminate sex: the former leading eventually to another prison stay (two months in the town of Vouziers for several violent physical attacks against his mother), the latter, helping along with assorted lawsuits, virtually to lead him to penury, owing to his relationships, with unscrupulous casual partners. **Jadis et Naguère** (Formerly and Lately)

was brought out at the beginning of 1885, still at Verlaine's own expense, by Léon Vanier. This collection contains the famous 'Art Poétique' (Poetic Art-1886), exposing the poet's perception about poetry, and laying the tenets of Symbolism, as also the poem 'Langueur' (Languour) - the manifesto of Decadence.

After the death of his mother in 1886, he was left almost totally without financial resources, and lived in slums and hospitals, cared for by two elderly prostitutes, spending his days drinking absinthe in Parisian cafés. He continued to write poetry, but its quality had considerably declined. But as his talent was on the wane, his literary reputation grew. Young poets admired his works and sought him out. In 1894, he was elected France's "Prince of Poets" by his peers. He was invited to lecture in England by Arthur Symonds and others interested in the new doctrine of Symbolism. He was to some extent relieved by a subscription arranged by a committee of literary men. He died in January 1896, aged fifty-one.

1.2.Changampuzha Krishnapillai – an introduction

Changampuzha as he was called for short, was born on 11th October 1911, into a modest but dignified Nair family at Edappally, Kerala. In³ keeping with the matriarchal system, he lived in the maternal home and his father also stayed with him. An advocate's clerk by profession, Changampuzha's father was a harsh disciplinarian, keenly watching over his son to the extent of disallowing him to mingle freely

³ As expressed in his autobiography -*Thudikunna Thallukal*(Vibrant Pages)

with the local kids, for fear of imbibing their loose, “unethical” ways. The family lived quite comfortably during this period. A tempestuous child, Changampuzha constantly demanded the attention of his mother. When he was ten years old, tragedy struck the family in the shape of the sudden demise of his father. Though the young poet felt a secret elation at being freed from the rigours of discipline, he had to wage since, a constant battle against poverty, with a younger brother and his mother’s family to reckon with. The life of ease and comparative luxury suddenly changed to one of continuous struggle for existence. Moreover, in the aftermath of the Second World War, it was a period of great economic depression. An intelligent lad, he did quite well at his studies, displaying poetical skills at a very early age. It was in poetry that he found solace to his sorrows. Nevertheless, he held an optimistic view of life.

Due to financial constraints coupled with his frequent romantic adventures and their consequences, his academic pursuits suffered intermittent lapses. He was able to complete his school education only by the age of twenty-three. His formative years were governed by an over-indulgent mother and grandmother, with no authoritative force to check his dissolute habits. As a result, while moving into his teens, Changampuzha left no stone unturned in the exploration of his emotional and erotic adventures, causing considerable disgrace and grief to his loved ones. With agreeable physical features and amicable disposition of mind, Changampuzha made friends easily, Raghava Menon being one of them. Both hailing from Edappally and poetically inclined, they struck a strong bond of friendship while in middle-school. Together, they breathed a new

life into Malayalam poetry and came to be known as ‘Edappally Poets,’ raising many an eyebrow in literary circles, for their daring experiments.

The All Kerala Literary Convention held periodically at Edappally, provided the opportunity for the ‘Edappally Poets’ to become acquainted with the great Malayalam poets of the time namely, Shri Ulloor S. Parameswara Iyer, Vallathol, Punassery Nambi, Ramavarma Appan Thampuran, P.K. Narayana Pillai, G.Sankarakurup, and the like. Both Changampuzha and Raghavan Pillai served as volunteers for these meetings and these occasions were fruitful in moulding their literary perceptions. While pursuing his studies at St. Mary’s School, Alwaye, Changampuzha got acquainted with the renowned teacher at the Sanskrit school—Shri Kuttipuzha Krishnapillai who first instilled in him a thirst for world literature by loaning him numerous books of world-renowned authors and holding discussions on them. Changampuzha painstakingly studied English for the purpose. Later, while completing his studies at S.R.V. High School, on the occasion of another meeting of the All Kerala Literary Convention, he had the good fortune to get better acquainted with the noted poet Prof. G.Sankara Kurup, who loaned him the book “An Anthology of World Poetry” which widened his perception of world literature. The book was returned only after a year, by which time Changampuzha had translated about 150 poems into Malayalam!

When Changampuzha joined Maharajah’s College for his Intermediate studies, he was twenty - three years of age and already three of his compositions – **Bashpanjali** (Tearful Homage -1934) **Hemantha**

Chandrika (Moon of Spring -1934) and **Aradhakan** (Admirer -1935) had been published. Teachers and students alike were thrilled to have a poet in their midst. His English Professor Mr. N. V. Narayanaswamy was instrumental in enriching his interest in world literature. With the publication of the pastoral elegy **Ramanan**, in 1936, in remembrance of the sudden demise of his friend, Raghavan Pillai, Changampuzha attained celebrity status. Being jilted by his lady love, the timid and sensitive Raghavan Pillai had taken his own life. It is this tragic deception that has been portrayed in the work, earning him instant popularity. At a time when the portals of knowledge were thrown open to all and sundry, Changampuzha's **Ramanan**, was widely read and appreciated by all strata of society, making him the poet of the masses. He chose a diction accessible to the common man and infusing it with music, spoke of the dreams, desires and deceptions of the ordinary mortal. He seemed to champion the cause of the common man.

After the successful completion of his Intermediate course, Changampuzha decided to pursue a B.A.Honours Degree in Malayalam at the Arts College, Thiruvananthapuram. As an established poet, he had a lot of admirers and fans, mostly ladies. Moreover in the first year, one of Changampuzha's own works – **Ramanan** was prescribed in the programme, adding to his fame and popularity. Much to everyone's astonishment, after the end of the first year at Art's College, Changampuzha – the poet of love, yielding to tradition, married a girl chosen by his family members! After his 'arranged' marriage, he returned to Thiruvananthapuram to resume his studies amidst severe financial difficulties. The generosity of a friend helped him make ends meet.

However due to his manifold activities and distractions, he managed to clear his course only with a third class, snuffing out his chances of becoming a College Professor.

Changampuzha worked for a short while at a tutorial college run by a friend, before obtaining a job at the military accounts office at Pune. Being away from his family made life difficult for him. Fortunately for him, the Assistant Military Accountant General was a Keralite and a fan of his works. Upon learning his identity and problems, the Assistant Accountant General took measures to get the poet transferred to Kochi. So grateful was Changampuzha for this favour that he dedicated the 13th edition of **Ramanan** to the ‘Assistant Military Accountant General – A.P.B. Nayar Esq.’

His stay at Kochi (Karuvellipady) along with his family was a tranquil period. His second child, a daughter, was born during his stay here. However, besieged with an arthritis complaint, Changampuzha decided to consult a famous doctor, whose wife happened to be an ardent admirer of his works. The doctor, after a detailed examination, advised the poet to undergo regular treatment at his clinic, taking sufficient rest. Under the strict surveillance of Devi, the doctor’s wife, Changampuzha regained his health, but not before he had captivated her heart. Devi, a woman of great beauty and grace, was also a poetry lover, being able to recite Malayalam verses charmingly. Eventually the treatment sessions turned out to be occasions for poetical discussions, leading to the union of hearts as well as minds, - which went largely unnoticed by the others. The poet

quickly regained his health, upon which Devi engaged him to give tuitions to her young child, so as to be able to continue their relationship. Later she advised him to take up legal studies at Madras, where he could stay with her elder sons doing professional studies there. That way they could correspond with each other without any hindrance until further plans could be hatched. They even exchanged rings to bind their relationship. So enamoured was Changampuzha of Devi that he even had the idea of eloping with her!

Changampuzha did take up legal studies at Madras after quitting his job. While there, he had an attack of typhoid and was admitted to a hospital in a delirious state. During this period, Devi's sons who had been caring for him, intercepted a love letter written by their mother to the poet. In the uproar that followed, the lovers were forced to sever forever their platonic relationship and Changampuzha returned to Edappally, defeated and humiliated, with family ties broken. He became more addicted to alcohol and ganja. Finally through the mediation of one of his wife's uncles, a reconciliation was brought about and the family was reunited. Soon after, the poet was offered the post of editor of the publishing house- 'Mangalodayam', at Trichur. The stay at Trichur was a happy period. The company, under the guidance of Changampuzha, started reaping profits. But gradually he reverted to his old habit of drinking at the behest of low-profile publishing houses who were exploiting him to protect their vested interests. The company started incurring losses again, and Changampuzha quit his job to return to Edappally. Before long, he was diagnosed as suffering from tuberculosis. Upon learning about the illness of the poet, his fans donated generously to help meet the expenses of the treatment. It

was decided to take the poet to Coimbatore for better care, but before that could materialize, he met with his end on 17th June 1948.

Changampuzha, in the short span of thirty- seven years(of which only seventeen were really productive), performed the remarkable feat of producing fifty-seven compositions, including a novel and innumerable translations! A man with a broad vision and always open to the changing trends in world literature, he revealed in his Presidential address –*Sahitya Chinthakal* (Literary Musings) at the Second Annual Conference of the All Kerala Progressive Writer’s Association, held at Kottayam in 1945- that he was considerably influenced by Verlaine’s ‘Poetic Art’ (1866), which is an exhortation to poets to shun verbalism and infuse poetry with music. He stated definitively that the future of Malayalam literature lay in its association with the latest trends in world literature, the knowledge of which would only serve to embellish and enrich the native language.

At a time when Malayalam poetry was laden with the cumbersome structures of the Sanskrit literary tradition, this perception of Verlaine was gladly welcomed by Changampuzha, who was desperately seeking a means to evolve a simpler style, appealing to the common man. Though the poems of Kumaran Asan⁴ and Vallathol⁵ were a break- through from the classical tradition, they were not free from verbalism. Hence Verlaine’s insistence on simplicity of diction and musicality made a great impression on Changampuzha, and he decided to make striking

⁴ N. Kumaran Asan-Malayalam poet who initiated a revolution by giving importance to lyric poetry.His main focus was on social issues.

⁵ Vallathol Narayana Menon –also a lyricist, championing the national movement.

innovations in Malayalam poetry, much to the consternation of the scathing critics of the time, who spared no effort in playing down his fame and popularity!

1:8 Verlaine's role

In the works of **Verlaine**, two impressions predominate- that only the self is important, and that the function of poetry is to preserve moments of extreme sensation and unique impression. The aptitude of the poet to receive all sorts of impression from outside (owing to the initiation of Poe and Baudelaire) predisposed him to this aesthetic, along with the artistic context of the epoch. Incidentally, it was in 1874, the date of the publication of the **Songs without Words** that the famous painting of Claude Monet "*Impression, soleil levant*" (Impression: Sunrise) was exhibited for the first time. The impressionism of Verlaine is based on a double fusion: fusion of the state of a soul and a landscape, but also between the diverse sensations, Thus the image, the colour becomes sound.

“The deceptively fine days brightened my poor soul all day
And there they shone in the copper-coloured sunset⁶”

In this couplet, the sound gets converted in movement, in vibration in space, and materializes as a tremor of excitement. Other effects of synaesthesia blend the auditory and gustative impressions (sharp guitars, long sobs of the violin). Like painters, Verlaine delighted in fractionalizing the visual field to benefit detail at the expense of

⁶ Poem VII of **Sagesse**(Wisdom)

composition(the sky⁷, a tree⁸, the clock⁹, a bird¹⁰) He sought to render the sensation by substituting the logical presentation (linking words) by simple introductory words (“It’s here¹¹”)

The poet, with his fine-tuned sensibility is considered to be uniquely equipped to convey to others the truth of the Ideal. Words seem to acquire magical properties, making possible their use as ‘symbols’ rather than ‘dictionary equivalents’. Verlaine’s earliest works, **Saturnien Poems** and **Gallant Celebrations** give evidence of the suggestive evocation of mood and the haunting verbal music, which were to become important elements in the art of the aesthetes. Perhaps his finest collection is **Songs without Words**. In the same year that it appeared (1874), he wrote ‘Poetic Art’- a poem setting forth his aesthetic ideas. Verlaine emphasizes musicality (“Music above all”) and points out another aesthetic ideal with his call for a poetry of suggestion rather than statement, creating a reality free from definition or discursive comment (... the grey song/ which joins the vague to the precise”)....

1:9 Changampuzha’s art

A ‘litterateur’ of broad vision and wide reading, **Changampuzha** was of the firm opinion that the progress of Malayalam literature depended on the latest developments in world literature. Much impressed by the

⁷ From the poem- ‘Le ciel est pardessus le toit...’

⁸ (The sky above the roof is....)

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ From the poem ‘It’s Here...’ (Arietta I-RSP)

Romantic and Symbolic movements, the works of Baudelaire, Verlaine and Rimbaud, had impacted his compositions. As expressed in his **Sahitya Chinthakal**¹², Verlaine's poem 'Poetic Art', in particular, with its exhortation to abandon rhetoric, giving importance to music alone, was highly influential in fixing his poetic perspective.

In the choice of theme as well as structure, one is impressed by the brevity and simplicity of Changampuzha's poems, to say nothing of its sheer musical quality. Like Verlaine, he has laid focus on the intensity of the emotion expressed at the moment, choosing a metrical structure borrowed from the folk tradition, which he believed was most suitable to convey the idea to the reader. The very first poem he wrote, impresses one by its aesthetic appeal, uttered by a flower-girl:-

“Oh who will, oh who will buy
This crowning ecstasy of my garden¹³?”

Then again from his famous work “**Ramanan**,” the words of the heroine Chandrika:-

“Never have I seen a mind so-
Wonderful as a bouquet of flowers!”

Changampuzha's prosody is perfectly attuned to his aesthetic perception. Instead of modelling himself blindly on the style of his predecessors, he evolved a style of his own, best disposed to convey the 'highs' and 'lows' of his emotional travesties. Changampuzha displayed

¹² 'Literary Musings'-1945

¹³ From the poem 'Aa Poomala' (That garland of flowers)-A **Tearful Homage**

an extraordinary talent in picking out mellifluous words with which to fill his poems. Like Verlaine, he could portray pictures through words, turning his sketching environment musical.

A lover of the beauty of sound, form, music and imagination, Changampuzha wishes in the poem 'Soundaryapuja' (Adoration of Beauty)

"If bliss is intoxicating,
I would always want to be inebriated"

In his preface to the work **Sudhangatha**, Changampuzha speaks of the way his creativity works. He says that in certain emotion-filled moments, his poetic heart, surging with tremors of excitement, used to overflow with words of inspiration, as if in a trance. For a real artist, creativity is like a dream, wherein an invisible power is working within him, making him produce what he does. Doing the bidding of that invisible force is what art is all about. He says that he has very often written poems; at times he has done so without being aware of it. In the second instance, he used to be totally oblivious to his surroundings, without forethought, without fixing the metre, a sudden inspiration sprung from within! Upon reading it, he finds to his astonishment that it is rhythmical! During those inspired moments his heart and mind used to be drenched with music, possessing an allure like none other, in the ecstasies of which he used to get enthralled. At times while writing a poem, having reached mid-way, he has this sudden inspiration, after which he has no difficulty at all in finishing the composition. It is Changampuzha's opinion that a poem is a 'creative dream'. There is hardly a poem in his collection

which does not contain the word 'dream' in it. And it is mostly a self-centered dream. In the opinion of the writer and critic Prof. M.K. Sanoo, Changampuzha was gifted with the 'Midas touch', being able to turn into gold whatever he could lay his hands upon. Imaginative renderings of word meanings underwent an alchemical transformation at his hands, transporting the readers to ecstatic heights- which he believed to be the ultimate goal of poetry and which attracted him to the perception of the French Symbolists. There is perhaps no other Malayalam poet who has focussed on the individualistic experience as Changampuzha, as revealed in the wide usage of terms in his poems like 'I, mine, my, and the like.

As against the Cartesian attitude of "I think, therefore I am"- it was Changampuzha, in Malayalam literature, who first switched over to the stance-"I feel, therefore I am," of the Romanticists. Each poem of his was an acute portrayal of the intensity of the emotion experienced at the moment, making the reader also partake of the experience.

It is an undisputed fact that every individual is a product of the society of which he is a member. The following chapter aims at analyzing the social background of the poets concerned, to find out the role played by the milieu in shaping the creativity of Verlaine and Changampuzha.